

Enhancing the Early Reading Skills: Examining the Print Features of Preschool Children's Book

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the uses of print features in preschool children's books in the US and Turkey, in order to helping adults to understand print features and supporting children's print awareness. In this context, two hundred children's books was randomly selected from the US and Turkey. Document analysis was used for examining the children's books. For the analysis of how to use print features, this study used coding systems adapted from McCarier, Pinnel, and Fountas (2000) and Zucker, Ward, and Justice (2009). After identifying children's book literature as concept books, theme collections, rhythm's books of language, and story books, we evaluated print features of books according to six features: labeling/environmental print, visible speech, visible sound, letters in isolation, font changes, and bold or unique fonts in the coding system. Findings of this study showed that examining children's books in the US contains more print features than examining children's books in Turkey.

Keywords: children's literature, children's books, print awareness, print features

1. Introduction

Preschool years have an impact role on children's emergent literacy and these years are critical for developing print awareness and transitioning to formal reading (Pullen & Justice, 2003). Therefore, children need more opportunities for learning about print awareness (Neuman & Roskos, 1997). Children's books provide children exposure to print language, such as labels and sings, so that they can learn more print features with books (Neuman & Roskos 1993). Used print features like isolate words or letters, punctuation marks help to children understanding concepts about print. Thus, when books include print features, children built knowledge of the writing language (Learning Media, 1997). The focus of this study is print features in the children's books. This study provides awareness about the importance of the print features of children's books.

Children's books provide interdependence between the printed words and pictures. Considering the print features within children's books, such as typeface colors, lines, and orientation, they support children's emergent literacy (Zucker, Ward, & Justice, 2009). In support of this view, Justice and Ezell (2002) implemented 24 small group sessions of book reading in preschool, and they emphasized the print of the books in these sessions. Children showed significantly increased growth in their alphabet knowledge, concept of word, and word identification. These studies show that print awareness is an important skill for learning to read (McGinty et al., 2012). This is a broad term, consisting of writing rules and writing language, including print concept knowledge (left to right directionality, combinatorial properties of letters to make words), and alphabet knowledge (Justice, Bowles, & Skibbe, 2006; Justice & Kaderavek, 2003, p. 11; Pullen & Justice, 2003, p. 89; Vukelich et al., 2008). Children need to understand variety of prints and they need to expose to different types of printed materials (Dougherty, 1999; Justice et al., 2009).

Printed materials like language cards, book reading, and environmental print improves print awareness, because print in books is read on the page from left to right, and from top to bottom, and the pictures and print on the page are used and organized together (Ruddell, 1999). Children should learn first and last page of a book, and top and bottom page for improving their print awareness (Learning Media, 1997; Dougherty, 1999). Children should also learn the differences between print and pictures, where to begin reading on a page, and the relation

between pictures and print (Morrow, 2007). Print awareness is defined as the development of cognizance of the form and function of print. Clay (1979) used books for evaluating early print awareness of children and she asked some questions to children about print, such as “Show me where I can begin to read” (Justice & Ezell, 2002).

Research shows children’s print knowledge is one of the better predictors of children’s reading ability (Caplovitz, 2005). The National Early Literacy Panel’s study (NELP) found that the best predictor of children’s early reading success is word decoding and comprehension, before first grade and beyond (Developing Early Literacy, 2002). Storch and Whitehurst (2002) showed that preschool alphabetic skills are an important factor for kindergarten reading ability. These findings show the importance of early print knowledge for subsequent reading skills. Research also shows that children can recognize environmental print, such as letters or words (Justice et al., 2006). Many studies have showed that books are crucial to print awareness (Naporalla, 2002; Justice et al., 2010; Ozgider, 2010; Saracho & Spodek, 2010).

Three and four year-old children begin to recite their favorite books through conventional reading (Caplovitz, 2005). Research (Ezell & Justice, 2000; Justice & Ezell, 2000) has shown that adult-child shared reading of books is an important method for enhancing children’s print awareness, including distinct attention on print focus. Adults have a vital role on children’s emergent literacy skills and children are very enjoyable reading aloud and storytelling by their adults. Adults have conversation with children for exposing writing language and structure. If genre of books has more quality about print, they are valuable for children and they give visual cues (Learning Media, 1997).

Supporting this view, Sulzby (1985) found and described the developmental process around children’s storybook reading. The more children have experiences with storybooks, the more they have opportunity to build their reading ability. In this process, they can first use the books’ pictures as an important factor for building the story, and then they can begin to use print knowledge in their developmental reading process (Caplovitz, 2005).

Looking at examined children’s books studies, Cecen and Aydemir (2011) examined 50 children’s books according to the books readability, such as word and cause length. They found that 24% of children’s books were medium in their readability challenge. Gonen (1993) examined children’s books according to their concepts, pictures, and physical qualities, and she interviewed preschool teachers about their use of children’s books. She found that these books were inadequate for concepts, pictures, and physical quality and teachers did not have any university classes about children’s literature or about choosing quality children’s books. Cakmak and Gonen (1997) found that children’s books are inadequate in terms of these physical properties: bookbinding, quality of paper, and coloration. Ozgider (2010) examined children’s books between the England and Turkey and he found no difference in the concept and formal features of children’s books.

Gonen et al. (2011) examined 100 children’s books in terms of concepts, pictures, and physical quality. They found that 98 of these books had punctuation and spelling errors, and 93 had object pictures. They also determined the adequacy of these books according to the books’ size and text-image relationships. Studies have usually examined the external and internal features of children’s books. However, left to right organization of print, top to bottom organization of lines, special punctuation marks, and print meaning are embedded in the books’ content (Ruddell, 1999).

To date, a study that examines the print features of children’s books between the US and Turkey has not been published. This study was designed to address this gap in the literature, and it creates awareness about print features and print awareness, and it emphasizes print features of children’s books in both countries.

The specific research questions to be examined include:

What are the print features of children’s books?

How many print features are there in examined children’s books?

1.1 Purpose of the Study

Research showed that when children improve print awareness; they can increase future reading success and can engage early reading development (Ezel et al., 2000; Justice & Ezel, 2000, 2002; Justice & Lankford, 2002; Strickland & Schickedans, 2004; Justice et al., 2009; Zucker et al., 2009; Strickland & Abbott, 2010). The easiest way of developing print awareness on children is to develop children’s books (Ozgider, 2010). This study examined the print features of preschool children’s books, in order to help adults understand print features and support children’s print awareness with books. In addition, adults need to understand which elements are important for print awareness in children’s book. This study focuses on the print features of preschool children’s books in the US and Turkey. There is no study in the literature about the print features of children’s books

between the US and Turkey. This study addressed what the print features of preschool children's books are in the two countries. This study is initially crucial for both countries' print features of books; and this study and other similar studies attract attention to print features of children's books.

2. Method

Document analysis, which is one of the types of qualitative research, was used in the study. Document analysis is a social research method, and documentary work involves reading lots of written materials which give information about the targeted facts and events (Yıldırım & Simsek, 2008).

2.1 Documents

Ozgider (2010) compared children's books between Turkey and England, but there is no research about the US and Turkey children's books. This study examined the print features of 200 preschool children's books, including 100 from the US and 100 from Turkey. The preschool books were randomly chosen from bookstores, libraries, and preschool classrooms. The selected children's books were coded for their print features using a coding system developed by the investigators.

2.2 Coding System

This study used two coding systems. Before examining print features of children's books, the preschool books were identified for the genre of children's literature that they represent, such as concept books, theme collections, the rhythm of language, and story books (McCarier, Pinnel, & Fountas, 2000). The preschool books were identified under the four headings;

- (1) Concept book: ABC, color, counting, and various other concept books, etc.
- (2) The rhythm of language: song and rhymes, poetry, predictable patterns, and cumulative tales, etc.
- (3) Theme collection: seasons, habitats, animals, relationships, and family, etc.
- (4) Story books

The coding system was adapted from Zucker, Ward, and Justice's (2009) study; in which they described the relationship between emergent readers' print knowledge and print referencing. This coding system was used to identify the print features of each child's book. Including print features in a book was coded as a one the opposite as zero.

The following print features were used in the coding system of children's books:

- (1) Labeling/Environmental Print: The book has a label, word, or letter on it that is often on everyday things, or diagrams, figures, or photos include a print label
- (2) Visible Speech: The character's words or their speaking are shown in the book.
- (3) Visible Sound: The character's sound is written, such as brr, cluck.
- (4) Letters in Isolation: Letters are printed alone.
- (5) Font Changes: The font is changed in color, size, or orientation.
- (6) Bold or Unique Fonts: Font is changed to a bold or unique form, such as book, children, book.

2.2.1 Reliability of the Coding

Inter-coder reliability of the preschool level books in term of print features was assessed using Cohen's Kappa. The reliability of the coding protocol was evaluated by double coding fifteen percent of the transcripts. Two investigators independently coded each preschool book in six categories. An item-by-item comparison was made for each coding, in order to calculate an inter-rater agreement score. Inter-rater agreement was 89% for coding children's books' print features, $Kappa=.81$. Any differences in coding were resolved by the two coders prior to the full analysis.

2.3 Data Analysis

Prior to addressing our main research aims, we conducted descriptive analyses of the coding. In this study, the number and proportion of children's books' characterized as a concept book, rhythm of language book, theme book, or story book, was calculated. Then, the number and proportion of print features in books as labeling/environmental print, visible speech, visible sound, and letters in isolation, font changes, and bold or unique fonts was removed. This study exhibited the percentages of the books' print features.

3. Findings

3.1 Proportions of Children's Books

In this study, the most examined children's books from Turkey and the US were storybooks (58%). The second most examined children's books were theme books (21%). These results generally represent the use of storybooks in preschool classrooms. The least used children's books were the rhythm of language books (5%) (Table 1).

Table 1. Examined children's books' literature in both countries

	Concept book	The rhythm of language book	Theme book	Story book
Turkey	4%	2%	15%	79%
The USA	28%	8%	27%	37%
Total	16%	5%	21%	58%

Saracho and Spodek (2009) found that parents most frequently chose modern fantasy books. The least frequently chosen books are the poetry books. For principally aesthetic purposes, children's literature may be preferred, but good children's books also contribute to children's language and literacy learning (Saracho & Spodek, 2009). Therefore, when children's books are selected, their print features should be considered.

3.2 Print Features

Print can be embedded in pictures, such as speech balloons, visible sound, and environmental print/print labeling (Zucker et al., 2009). This study examined the print features of children's books: labelling/ environmental print, visible speech, visible sound, letters in isolation, font changes, and bold or unique fonts. Children's books' print features in Turkey showed different percentages according to the coding items. The results are given in Figure 1.

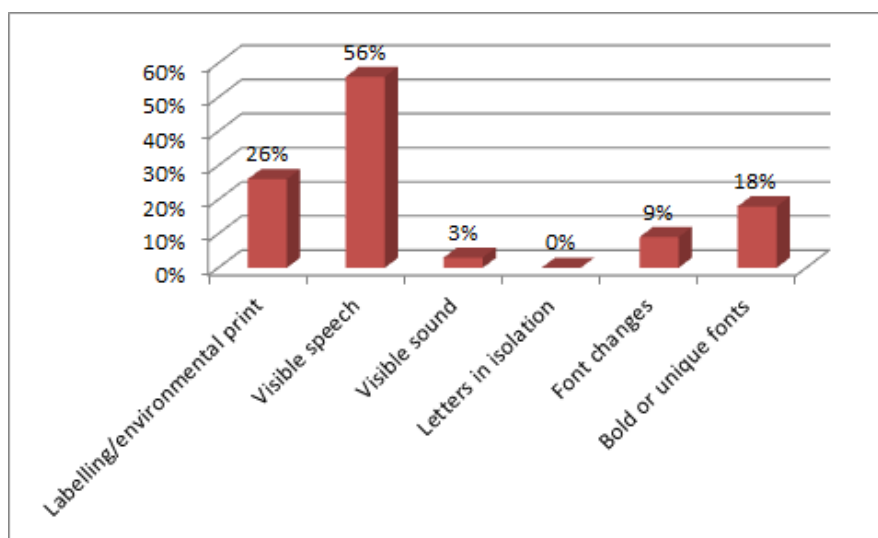


Figure 1. Examined children's books print features in Turkey

According to the figure, visible speech was used more than other print features in the examined children's books in Turkey. Labelling/environmental print was the second most frequently used print features. However, the examined books did not have letters in isolation. Visible sound (3%) and font changes (9%) were lower than others.

According to the print features, the examined children's books in the US showed a higher percentage of font changes (74%). Second, visible speech was 68% in children's books. Also, the results showed a high percentage for visible sound, bold and unique fonts, and labelling/environmental print (39%, 57%, and 48%). However, letters in isolation had the lowest percentage (12%) compared to other print features.

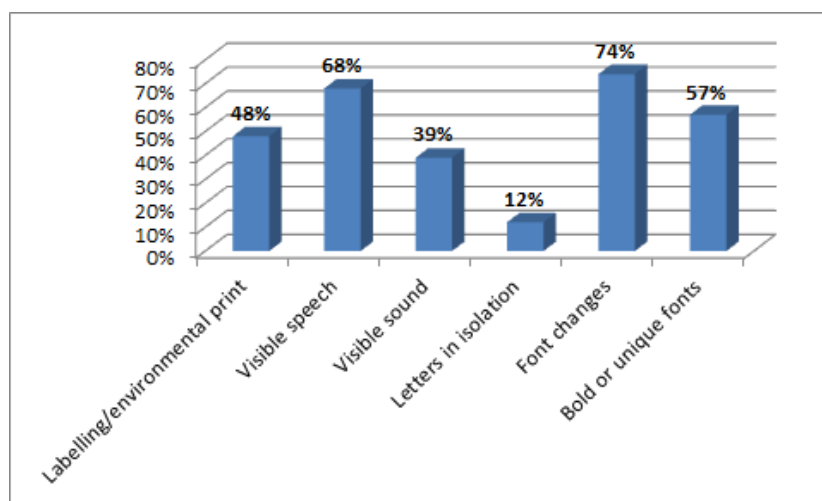


Figure 2. Examined children's books print features in the US

This study was examined how many print features there are according to six coding items. 25% of children's books in Turkey were without identified print features. There were no children's books with five and six print features. Approximately half of the examined children's books (49%) showed just one print feature. The following graph shows how many children's books had how many print features.

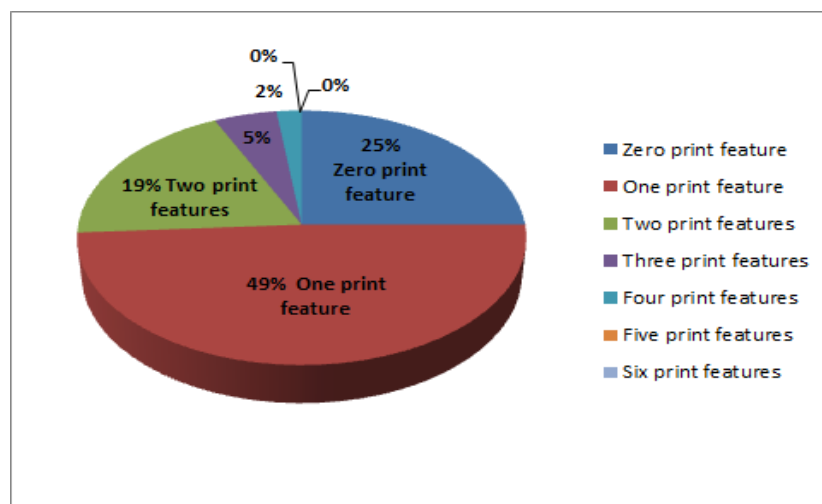


Figure 3. The percentage of print features examined in children's books in Turkey

Another important result was the total number of print features in children's books in the US. Two percent of the books did not have any print features. Also, two percent of the children's books had all six print features; this result is similar to Turkey. The lowest percentages were seen for these print features in both countries.

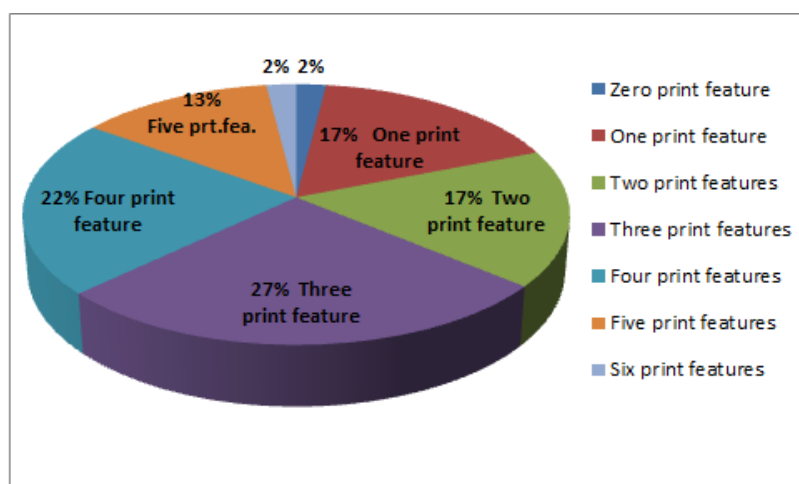


Figure 4. The percentage of print features examined in children's books in the US

Two hundred children's books were coded in both countries. The results showed that the most coded print feature was visible speech, and the least coded print feature was letters in isolation. Approximately one third of children's books had visible speech.

Table 2. Print features of children's books in Turkey and the US

	Labelling/ environmental print	Visible speech	Visible sound	Letters in isolation	Font changes	Bold or unique fonts
Turkey	26%	56%	3%	0%	9%	18%
The US	48%	68%	39%	12%	74%	57%
Total	37%	62%	21%	6%	41.5%	37.5%

In both countries, visible speech was coded highly in children's books (62%). The second most coded print features was font changes (41.5%). Also, this study showed that the least used print features were letters in isolation (6%). We also found that children's books had higher percentages of print features in the US. There were significant differences between countries regarding font changes (74%-9%), visible sound (39%-3%), letters in isolation (12%-0%), and bold and unique fonts (57%-18%). Also, another print feature, labelling/environmental print was coded more than twice as often in the US. Thus, print features were coded more in the US children's books and in Turkey.

4. Discussion

There are a number of studies about enhancing young children's reading through different reading activities in the literature (Justice & Ezell, 2000, 2002; Ezell et al., 2000; Pullen & Justice, 2003; Caplovitz, 2005; Justice et al., 2006; Rochdi, 2009; Justice et al., 2010). In particular, read aloud activities with different reading techniques in preschool prompt children's print-knowledge development (Justice et al., 2010; Rochdi, 2009). Teachers can be more helpful to children by using the print features of books for improving their print awareness (Justice & Lankford, 2002). Zucker et al. (2009) found that when children's books increase their print awareness, emphasizing print awareness by teachers increases. Therefore, having print features in children's books is important for preschool teachers. Naparalla (2002) found that when parents use print references in books, children significantly improve their print awareness. Also, children's early literacy and reading achievement increased due to their shared reading activities (Saracho & Spodek, 2009). Children can improve their basic print awareness skills, such as following words from top to bottom and from left to right, with books (Strickland & Abbott, 2010; Caplovitz, 2005). Therefore, children's books are very important for developing the print awareness skills.

This study answers two research questions: what are the print features of children's books and how many print features take place in examined children's books. Children's books were examined according to labelling/environmental print, visible speech, visible sound, letters in isolation, font changes, and bold or unique fonts. Looking at the comparison (Table 2), examined children's books in the US significantly contains more print features. 25 % of the examined children's books in Turkey did not have any print features, and 49% of children's books had only one print feature. Looking at the US, only 2% children's books did not have any print features, and 17% of children's books had one print feature. These results show that children's books need to use more print features in Turkey.

Parents and educators choose books carefully for children's encouragement and motivation to be a lifelong reader. Print awareness is important for children's literacy success (Strickland & Schickedanz, 2004). When adults consider print features within children's books, they can see how the author or illustrator used visible language, lines, and orientation (Zucker et al., 2009). For print awareness evaluation, adults can ask questions about the book's print (Strickland & Abbott, 2010). This study was examined font changes and bold or unique fonts in the children's books. Children's books in the US have higher percentages of these features, while children's books in Turkey do not have very much. Font changes and bold or unique fonts need to be more considered in children's books in Turkey for increasing their print awareness.

Books highlight the alphabet and the sounds of the letters for teaching letter knowledge. Some books clearly show the alphabet as both lower and upper case for letter-knowledge (Strickland & Abbott, 2010). This study showed that letters in isolation had the least percentages in both countries (USA-12%, Turkey-0%). High print features of children's books can prompt natural talking for teachers or parents about print features (Zucker et al., 2009). Therefore, if children's books have more print features, they can help to develop children's print awareness. This study informs to adults for choosing children's books and indirectly it provides to publish with more print features of children's books.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the print features of children's books of the US and Turkey to help understand the print features and to show the supporting print awareness of children. Looking at the children's books in both countries, the examined children's books in the US generally had more print features than those in Turkey. The quality of books is important for children to improve their language skills (Caplovitz, 2005). Clay (1979) claimed, "Without being able to read, children can understand conventions of a book as reading top-to-bottom and left-to-right on a page (in English), the difference between the book being upside-down or right side up, differentiation between pictures and print on a page, and the meaning of punctuation and spacing between words" (Caplovitz, 2005), so children's books can do more than to support children's print awareness. This study was an attempt to understand print features on children's books and focused on two countries. Further research should be conducted to learn how print features of children's books differ in the other countries.

6. Limitation

This study had some limitations. This study examined 200 children's books from bookstores, libraries and preschools in both countries. Therefore, the results of this study covered 200 children's books, which represent an important limitation to this study.

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Appendix

Examined children's books list in USA,	Examined children's books list in Turkey,
1) Pop! Went Another Balloon!	1) HangiŞapkeyıAlmalıyım?
2) Many Luscious Lollipops	2) ÇalışkanMarangozTakTak
3) January Brings the Snow	3) Lay Lay Lom
4) Dinosaurs Galore	4) Sarı YumakPiknikte,
5) The mixed-up chameleon by Eric Carle	5) Ben BirÇizgiyim
6) I saw it in the garden	6) Yumurta İle GelenSorumluluk
7) Johnny	7) KupiAnneannesinde
8) Americana Adventure	8) DostumBadi
9) The tale of Rabbit	9) ZeynepPostanede
10) Little Quack's Hide and Seek	10) Yaz
11) Mama, Do You Love Me	11) KırmızıDüğmeninDüşü
12) Hooway for Wodney	12) OyuncuBulut
13) Peekaboo Bugs	13) KırmızıFiliGördünüzümü?
14) Chester Raccoon And The Acorn Full of Memories	14) ZelişBanyoYapıyor
15) Skippyjon Jones in the Dog House	
16) Hot-Air Henry	
17) How Many Ways Can You Cut a Pie	

18) The Tree	15) MucitMaymunDenzaltısı
19) Little Dino's Egg	16) KöstebeğinEvi
20) Jack and the Beanstalk	17) HuzurEvi
21) Brainy Baby	18) OrmanınSesleri
22) Sheep Out to Eat	19) GezginiciKediMınavMüzede
23) Little Ladybug	20) Meraklı Sarı Yumak
24) What is a Jungle?	21) AyınYansıması
25) The Lion King	22) Ali'ninSıkıntısı
26) Monster Math	23) ÖğretmenimPamukGibi
27) My First abc Lift The Flap Board Book	24) KuğularAçKalmasın
28) The Talking Eggs	25) BanaDikkatleBakın
29) This is the Way We Eat Our Lunch	26) BoncukileTomurcuk
30) Let's Count It Out Jesse Bear	27) ÜçSokakKedisi
31) Let's Count It Out Jesse Bear	28) SevimliDostlar
32) Life in Ponds and Streams	29) Bilge Deve
33) Snow-board Adventure	30) YiyecekBeğenmeyenBalıkçıl
34) The Stinky Cheese Man and the Fairly Stupid Tales	31) Bilgehan'ınBisikleti
35) I'm The Best Artist in The Ocean	32) KardanAdamınEvi
36) Peace at Last	33) Papu'nunKorsanKıyafeti
37) The Friendly Snowman	34) YavruMaymunileYavruZürefa
38) I Can Read with My Eyes Shut!	35) ÖzgürUğurBöceği
39) Three Little Kittens	36) DolaptakiAyakkabılar
40) Colors and Shapes Discovery	37) OburKaz
41) Have you ever seen a moose taking a bath?	38) ArkadaşımKuklaveKuklaKöpek
42) Animal Homes	39) YalnızMenekşe
43) Frosty the Snowman	40) Ay AvcısıEskmolar
44) Milo and Mysterious Island	41) Şaşkın
45) Why Do I Have to Make My Bed?	42) GeceBekçisi
46) Can You Catch Josephine?	43) BaycanPaylaşmayıÖğreniyor
47) Tyrannosaurus Math	44) PıtırıcıkTatilde
48) Amazing Dinosaurs	45) Televizyocu Ali
49) The Little Mouse, The Red Ripe Strawberry, The Big Hungry Bear	46) MumiYardımlaşıyor
50) Daddy Could I Have an Elephant?	47) Yaya Geçidi
51) Spring Song	48) Zıp Zıp
52) Airplanes	
53) A Bear Ate My Pear	
54) Countdown to Kindergarten	
55) Countdown to Kindergarten	
56) Dashing Through the Snow	
57) Dashing Through the Snow	
58) Knuffle Bunny	

59) Whatever the Weather	49) SevimliGüversin
60) Fantastic! Wow! And Unreal!	50) FarklıÖrdekYavrusu
61) Abc	51) ÇirkinÖrdek
62) The Veggiecational Book	52) ZiziveArkadaşlarıTaşıtlarıÖğreniyor
63) My Big Book of Everything	53) DenizinArmağanları
64) What Color	54) HayırOlmazDemiştımAma
65) PB. Bear's Birthday Party	55) HuysuzKaplumbağa
66) Doggone Feet	56) BalcanBir Top Buluyor
67) Up! Tall! and High!	57) PapatyaileLale
68) Fluff and Billy	58) KırgınOyuncaklar
69) Good News Bad News	59) EnGüzelKuzu
70) Froggy's Worst Playdate	60) OburAmca
71) Oh So Tiny Bunny	61) OrmanParkı
72) The Little Gray Bunny	62) BülbulCiciş
73) Cheer up, Mouse!	63) İğne Satan Kirpi
74) I Will Keep You Safe and Sound	64) ÇevreciKanguru
75) How Rocket Learned to Read	65) MeraklıCeylan
76) Duck, Duck, Goose	66) Yavru Fil
77) That Makes Me Mad	67) Bekçi
78) Touch	68) PıtırıcıkTarlada
79) Old Elm Speaks	69) YavruPenguenileYavruFokBalığı
80) A Big and Little Alphabet	70) KimininDoğumGünü
81) Planting a Rainbow	71) FırıldakNeredeOlmakİsterdim
82) Don't Eat the Bluebonnets	72) AğlayanBulut
83) Copy me Copycup	73) Güneşve Ay
84) Fancy Nancy	74) BırakDağınıkKalsın
85) Curious Kitten	75) Tavşa Mondı AmeliyatOluyor
86) Exclamation Mark	76) Bu YaratığıSeveceksinEjderha
87) Randy Riley's Really Big Hit	77) Tavşan Bondı GözlükTakıyor
88) I Loathe You	78) Bu GeceKonserVar
89) Lucky Can't Sleep	79) YaşasınOkulaBaşladım
90) The Yellow Cap	80) Büyüyünce Ne Olacağım?
91) Who Needs Love	81) SirktekiŞekiller
92) Andrew Drew and Drew	82) DokunveHissetGüzelEvim-
93) Red Knit Cap Girl	
94) Bug Patrol	
95) I Will Save You Bobo	
96) Elmer and The Birthday Quake	
97) I am Not Tired Yet	
98) Lucky Ducklings	
99) The Boy Who Cried Bigfoot	
100) It's a Small World	

	83) Hayat BaşlıyorSerisi- Yönler-
	84) GülnurMisafirlikte
	85) UluÖnderAtamız
	86) Doğamız-2
	87) TekerlekveKanatlar
	88) KraliçeninYüzüğü
	89) Atatürk veKüçükÇoban
	90) KaragözveHacivat
	91) MasallarHazinesi
	92) DünyaÇocuklarıdır
	93) TitizTavuk
	94) MınavKedi
	95) Saatler
	96) Okulum- DeryaDuman
	97) TemizOl Hasta Olma
	98) ZeynepDişDoktorunda
	99) KıvrırcıkSokakta
	100) SebzeÇorbası

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